

# No taxation without representation!

Simona Scarpaleggia considers why it is important that women are equally represented in democratic parliaments worldwide.



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In times of conflict, unrest, and uncertainty, as people we are all programmed to look to our leaders for reassurance and guidance. In times of peace, we are also inclined to look at our respective governments, and the role that politics and politicians play in determining our future health and prosperity.

“Democracy,” as the former UK Prime Minister and wartime leader Winston Churchill once said, “is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried.” He was clear that it was a concept we should cherish, until something better could be found.

The concept of a democracy is founded on the principle that every person of age in a country can participate in political life if they so wish and have their say in decisions taken that impact their lives, from the taxes they pay, to the quality of the environment in which they live. They can choose to be engaged directly by being an elected representative, or by voting for someone else who best represents their views and their priorities.

Logic tells us that the best way for all of our collective views to be taken into consideration before any future policies or actions are decided is to have an equitable balance of representatives, men and women, young and old, and different ethnicities.

Unfortunately, all logic seems to have gone out of the window, especially when it comes to looking at the representation of women in democratic parliaments worldwide. Data from the United Nations makes for [alarming reading](#).

- As of 19 September 2022, there are 28 countries where 30 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government. At the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.
- Just 13 countries have a woman Head of State, and 15 countries have a woman Head of Government. Only 21% of government ministers were women, with only 14 countries having achieved 50% or more women in cabinets. With an annual increase of just 0.52 percentage points, gender parity in ministerial positions will not be achieved before 2077.
- As a further point of interest, the five most commonly held portfolios by women ministers are: Family/children/youth/elderly/disabled; followed by Social Affairs; Environment/natural resources/energy; Employment/labour/vocational training, and Women affairs/gender equality.

The situation is bleak in most places you look. In the US, women make up only 24% of the US Senate and 28% of the Congress. In the European Parliament, the situation is a little better: it has seen a steady increase in the proportion of female members (MEPs) over the years, from 16% in 1979 to 39.5% in 2021.

Some countries have a higher number of female ministers than male: Nicaragua leads the way (58.8%) with Sweden (57.1%) and Belgium (57.1%) close behind. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. The WEF Global Gender Gap Index shows that even though the global average share of women in ministerial positions nearly doubled between 2006 and 2022, they still represent a minority (from 9.9% to 16.1%) and that situation doesn't appear likely to improve any time soon.

But why should we care? Why is it important that women are equally represented in parliaments? There are perhaps three key reasons: first, because it is right and fair; second, because it captures the thoughts, views and experiences of the whole population, and not just a potentially biased few; and third, because it provides relevant role models opening to a more inclusive approach in other walks of life.

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The first point is perhaps the easiest to deal with. Women should of course have equal representation in parliaments because it is fundamentally unfair otherwise. Equal representation would mean that both men and women had equal access to politics and political parties, to election lists and, if the electoral law is correctly and fairly applied, it would be statistically likely that a balanced representation would be achieved.

The second point is also easy to grasp. Parliaments should mirror society, and better decisions are made, and policies determined, by capturing the needs of both male and female citizens. Take the important issue of gender budgeting.

Today many disparities and inequalities between the genders appear to have become embedded, to a greater or lesser extent, in the baseline of public policies and the allocation of public resources. The negative impacts of this legacy are evident across many policy domains, including the labour market, education and health, as well as gender disparities in management and leadership.

In recent decades, much work has been done to promote 'gender mainstreaming', i.e. designing all public policies with gender equality in mind. The 2015 OECD Recommendation on Gender Equality in Public Life set out a multi-dimensional approach for advancing gender equality as a core principle of modern public governance, including the promotion of gender-responsive policies, gender budgeting, and closing the gender gap in public leadership and public employment.

Gender budgeting is used to identify the impact of public policies on both women and men. If, for example, a government was seeking to reduce the cost of public transport, it might look at cutting a particular route or reducing service at particular times of the day. But it would also assess how any proposed changes might in fact create a bigger problem, say, for working women, who might have a greater need of public transport to get to work outside of 'rush-hour' timetables or to different parts of a town or city. By adopting this approach, and mirroring the needs of the society they represent, they achieve the dual satisfaction of delivering gender equality within a required budget. Extending this concept into other areas of policy making, and future laws and regulations on health, child-care, parental leave etc would enormously benefit from a balanced contribution of men and women to the decision-making process.

The third good reason why a more balanced representation of women in parliaments is needed is in relation to role models. Role models provide inspiration to others. They demonstrate what is possible, not just in a political career but also in other public service or professional endeavours. This is why it is important to not only monitor and talk about representation in parliaments but also to apply the proper social pressure to ensure a growing number of women are represented.

Some countries have opted to introduce quotas to address the imbalance of female representation. Others, like Italy, have created electoral mechanisms that on the surface should guarantee a 50:50 split,

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but in practice are easily by-passed. This is especially disappointing, since on the one hand it suggests an authentic commitment to improving equality, while in reality it delivers nothing of the sort, and neither do they appear shamed by it.

Ensuring women are equally represented in democratic parliaments worldwide should not be something a country can play around with. Supporting women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life is, after all, essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030 that those countries have committed to. But true equality will only be achieved if it is made a priority, and because the benefits of doing so are clearly communicated and understood. Only that way can we accelerate the process and produce visible results.

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